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Viewing cable 05PARIS7195, GISCARD D'ESTAING ON FRENCH POLITICAL SCENE,

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
05PARIS7195	2005-10-20 13:52	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Paris

Appears in these articles:
http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/documents-wikileaks/article/2011/02/09/wikileaks-les-visiteurs-de-l-ambassade_1477418_1446239.htm

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 007195

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/18/2015

TAGS: [FR](#) [PREL](#) [EUN](#) [POLINT](#)

SUBJECT: GISCARD D'ESTAING ON FRENCH POLITICAL SCENE,
EUROPE, TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Craig R. Stapleton, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) On October 18 former President Giscard d'Estaing hosted Ambassador Stapleton to breakfast -- and to a magisterial presentation of French history and the current political scene, along with trenchant observations on Europe and transatlantic relations. Giscard said he believes that post-Iraq strains in the bilateral relationship are behind us, due in large part to President Bush's and Secretary Rice's visits earlier this year. Europe's future evolution remains clouded as a result the failed French referendum on the constitution. Much will depend on the French Presidential elections of 2007. Giscard believes that the unfolding rivalry between Prime Minister de Villepin and Interior Minister Sarkozy is the main front in the battle for France's future leadership; the left is in "complete disarray," and very unlikely to produce a winning candidate. Of the two center-right contenders, Sarkozy is more "European," i.e. more likely to lead a French effort to re-launch the politically-integrated, globally influential Europe that the Constitution sought to institutionalize. Villepin, by contrast, is more of a "nationalist," interested in using ad hoc partnerships to bolster French industries and interests. Giscard described the French people as pro-American on a personal level, but counseled that his country -- now of medium rank -- should be handled with the deference due its history as a great power. Above all, France does not want to appear to be submissive to the will of the U.S. End Summary.

2. (C) Giscard took obvious pleasure in using an introductory get-together with Ambassador Stapleton to impart some fundamentals for understanding France, along with observations on the current political scene. Giscard

affirmed that a key to understanding his, "an old country," is an appreciation of the continuity with its past. It is a country whose institutions, structures and habits of mind derive from a past which the French revolution did not succeed in cutting off. In fact, the Revolution was a relatively short-lived affair which had a significant but not exclusive impact on subsequent French history. He observed that the left in France is a product of the social divide that developed during the period of France's industrialization beginning in the 1870s and lasting through the years just preceding World War I. It is a left still informed by the bitterness and alienation of the working class of those years, reacting to the short-sighted, self-centered policies of the ruling bourgeoisie.

13. (4) Giscard cited de Gaulle's historic contribution of containing the Communists after the Second World War, preventing them from taking control of the governmental structures -- thereby permitting France to escape the experience of an American occupation regime which might otherwise have been its fate in the developing Cold War. Noting that, while not a Gaullist, he had served under de Gaulle, Giscard offered a vignette from a later episode -- when de Gaulle decided to withdraw France from NATO's integrated military structures and to evict the Alliance from France. Giscard quoted De Gaulle, explaining to him why he had moved against NATO: "Do you know why I've asked the Americans to leave? Here's why: An American official has asked to see me. I inquired when and how the American official was arriving in France, and was told he, and other U.S. officials, fly in to Evreux (a U.S. military base outside of Paris) without any knowledge of French authorities." France was not exercising control over its own airspace, a fundamental attribute of a sovereign state.

14. (C) Giscard observed that relations over the past year with the U.S. have largely returned to normal, following the strained period dating to the break over Iraq. President Bush's visit to Europe early in the year and the Secretary's visit to Paris early in the year had succeeded in launching this rapprochement. The French, observed Giscard, are basically well-disposed to the American people; they are interested in the U.S., they visit it in great numbers, and they find themselves naturally drawn to Americans. However, the political relationship is a sensitive one given France's history as an erstwhile great power. Because of its relatively recent fall in the geopolitical standings, France can not be seen as submissive to the U.S.; it will always err on the side of keeping up appearances as an independent actor. Responding to the Ambassador's question with regard to French perceptions of U.S. attitudes towards Europe, Giscard referred to the "permanent ambiguity" of the U.S. position. He offered his own first-hand observations of recent U.S. presidents. He cited Ford and George H.W. Bush as favorable to Europe's political evolution, while Nixon, Carter, and Clinton were less clear in their approach. He characterized the U.S. during President Bush's first term as unfriendly to the idea of Europe as a strong political actor on the international stage -- but the strains over Iraq had obviously contributed to this result.

15. (C) Giscard noted that there are three conceptions of Europe: a free-trade zone, a la NAFTA; a core Europe of 6-10 countries; and, a politically structured Europe comprising the entire, enlarged EU membership. Tony Blair certainly favors the first option; some, including some in France, are tempted by the second; the constitution had been an attempt to institutionalize the third. Giscard stated that he did foresee significant movement in any direction in the immediate future, and that much would depend on the outcome of the French Presidential elections in 2007.

16. (C) Giscard willingly pronounced on the current array of Presidential contenders, their prospects, and their attitudes towards Europe. There are no statesmen in the political offing, he opined. The real political story in France today, Giscard added, is the rivalry between de Villepin and Sarkozy. The left, he said, is in "total disarray." He does not see Socialist Party leader Hollande as exercising control, and none of the announced or probable Socialist Party candidates are credible contenders. Jospin, while an honest man and a competent Prime Minister ("who made several big mistakes, beginning with the imposition of the 35-hour work week, whence our current economic difficulties...") will not likely emerge as a rallying point for the left; his return would in fact announce the failure of the left. There is a significant difference between Villepin and Sarkozy, as far as Giscard is concerned. Villepin is a "nationalist," Sarkozy more a classic pro-European. Villepin, who doesn't know a whit about economics, is attracted to ideas such as "national champions" and to reaching out selectively across Europe for economic, commercial and political partnerships. Sarkozy is more wedded to the traditional French concept of multiplying France's influence through its support for and leadership of a politically integrated Europe. Assessing the rivals, Giscard pronounced Villepin as brilliant and

attractive but without a political machine at his disposal, while Sarkozy is energetic and smart enough -- and in control of the main party of the center-right. Villepin is currently enjoying the advantage of "novelty," but that will dissipate over time. The period remaining until the April 2007 elections is sufficiently long to render any predictions chancy.

17. (C) Stressing he is not "obsessed" with the failure of the European Constitutional Treaty, despite his pride of authorship, Giscard faulted Chirac -- never really committed to Europe, in his view -- for having misused it for his own political purposes. In Chirac's calculation, the constitution had offered the possibility of a referendum, which was to be his vehicle to re-election in 2007. Giscard said he had warned Chirac against instrumentalizing the Constitution in this way; a referendum was not needed, and risked turning into a losing plebiscite. The referendum defeat was resulted from a number of factors -- in particular lack of confidence in Chirac and the Raffarin Government, unease over past EU enlargements, and opposition to future enlargements. What it did not measure was popular feelings about the constitution itself, which continues to be supported by a strong majority of the French public (Giscard cited a figure of 60 per cent support as measured in a poll just after the referendum.) Giscard noted that the referendum was not Chirac's first political miscalculation, and cited the dissolution of the National Assembly (following de Villepin's advice) in 1997, which had led to five years of forced co-habitation with the Socialists under Lionel Jospin. In 2002 Chirac received the lowest score ever for an incumbent president in the first round of the elections -- well below 20 per cent. But he then made the mistake of interpreting the 80 per cent rejection of the Front Nationale's Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round as a landslide in his own favor.

18. (C) Comment: Giscard clearly enjoyed his opportunity to pronounce on the current scene and its context -- particularly for the benefit of the Ambassador of a country he admires and whose pre-eminence in international affairs he willingly acknowledges. The 79-year old former President said he intends to continue to visit the U.S., citing specifically an outstanding invitation to Stanford -- and looks forward to receiving American visitors and maintaining an ongoing conversation with Ambassador Stapleton. Giscard's low esteem for Chirac, with whom he has a long, tortured relationship, is not a surprise. His apparent preference for Sarkozy over Villepin likely derives from his own historic rivalry with Villepin's mentor -- but is notable, given Giscard's standing as France's senior statesman and his continuing influence within at least a portion of the center-right. Finally, Giscard's sense of European drift, at least over the short term, is striking, coming from France's leading proponent of a politically empowered EU.

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